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Pre-college remedial courses in reading and writing at Bronx Community College are described. Teachers with experience in high school remedial reading and composition and college composition taught a combined remedial reading-composition course and a control remedial composition course, so that reading improvement could be tested for both classes. A placement examination was used to select students. Typical student weaknesses are described and evaluation of the experimental program is included. An appendix reports on textbooks and curriculum for the experimental class. (AF)

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READING IMPROVEMENT FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

From: The CEA Critic, Vol. 28, No. 2, November 1965
By: Arthur Beringause

TE 500 344

The Department of English of Bronx Community College has long sought to help all entering freshmen attain college-level reading skills and habits. Until last summer we tried various approaches, including use of machines to increase speed and/or perception span, use of films and film strips to demonstrate concretely just how a person reads, use of various workbooks with seemingly standardized tests designed to furnish developmental levels of attainment. Nothing worked as well as desired. Nothing, that is, until last summer.

This time we went at the goal of helping students read at college-level in a much different way. We recruited several teachers who had taught remedial reading and remedial composition in the high school as well as composition in college. Two of the men seemed just right for an experimental project in reading. They had been trained by the head of our Department when he was a supervisor in the secondary schools. Both men employed similar pedagogical methods, and both showed evidence of highly skillful teaching. One man is particularly interested in the lot of the so-called "poor reader and writer," and he had gone on to complete his Ph.D. in semantics and the improvement of composition. The other man, while interested in this type of student, has no desire to concentrate his efforts in that direction.

We explained our situation and some of the problems to both men. Our College gives a placement examination in reading (Nelson-Denny) and in writing (a sample theme) to every entering freshman, whether matriculated or non-matriculated. On the basis of that examination,we place the student in:

GE 01 Writing Laboratory
GE 02 Reading Laboratory
GE 1 Freshman Composition

No student who does poorly on the placement examination may take GE 1 until he

has successfully completed the remedial course(s) to which he has been assigned.

Some of our students have poor speech patterns and weak cultural backgrounds. They often have very little understanding of the reading process, and just as often they have little of the self-discipline that reading necessitates. They need, therefore, continual motivation and encouragement coupled with on-going realistic appraisals of their strengths and weaknesses. They must be told explicitly that they are to be graded on the basis of achievement and not on effort. Their teachers must neither sugar-coat the amount and difficulty of work required of students nor make any sort of promise they cannot promptly fulfill.

One group of our students known as College Discovery enter with the rest of the freshman class. But the sole requirements for admission for such students center around recommendation by their high school principal and guidance counselor. The result of this admission policy is that such students who may not have had academic success in high school, are placed in regular classes with other freshmen and without any discrimination. In fact, their names are kept secret. The only difference in their admission is that they must attend summer session before beginning the regular college year.

After testing the entire freshman class (some 1,500), we found that out of 139 College Discovery students 16 were judged deficient in reading and in written composition. We placed those students in GE 01CDD and GE 02EF, which met daily for five weeks from 10:10 a.m. to 2:25 p.m. Three non-College Discovery students had been placed in the classes at registration, and we did not remove them for fear of upsetting their programs.

Dr. A. met with us again and again to plan the summer's work. We decided to treat GE 01CDD and GE 02EF as one class, Dr. A. agreeing to use the last half hour to forty-five minutes each day as a conference period in which he could deal on an individual basis with every student. Our head of department strongly urged that Dr. A. conduct the class as informally and pleasantly as possible, but that he inform students that they would be graded solely on the basis of achievement.

Mr. X's GE 01CCD was to be treated as a control group. The class consisted of 22 students deficient in writing but not in reading. Mr. X made no attempt to teach reading intensively. Instead, he taught the class as we usually teach GE 01, placing great emphasis on writing skills.

Dr. A. agreed to use the textbooks selected by our head of department and to require the reading of at least two short novels and an adult magazine like Harper's. He promised to use a great deal of the mimeographed material he had prepared for high school seniors in remedial classes. Classroom observation and continual conference with Dr. A. by our head of department showed that Dr. A. at no time slavishly adhered to or used any mimeographed materials or textbooks. He geared the work directly to the needs of the class as a group and of the students as individuals with different strengths and weaknesses.

In Appendix A are Dr. A.'s reports on the textbooks, the curriculum, and the activities of GE 01CDD and GE 02EF. Out of the 16 College Discovery students, 3 gained 2 years or more in reading, 8 gained one year or more, 4 a good part of a year, and 1 regressed slightly although analysis of his test scores indicates that he is reading better and doing more poorly in vocabulary. Of the non-College Discovery students, the 2 for whom Placement Tests were available showed a gain for reading. There were no test results for the third. Mr. X's class shows different results. There are slight gains in reading here and there, and there are slight regressions. But there is nothing significant by way of improvement or of regression.

We believe that this reading project demonstrates that students who are properly taught and well-motivated can make marked gains in reading improvement in a relatively short space of time. This is not true of writing, at least so far as our project is concerned. But written composition is another area, and there will be other summers for experimentation.

Appendix A: Brief Report on Textbooks Used in GE 01 and GE 02 Summer Session 1965

From Paragraph to Essay: Good text.
Scribner's Handbook of English: Not suitable for 01 (level much too high); too analytical and academic; lacks useful exercises and illustrations. I recommend replacement with English Workshop, Review Course by Blumenthal and Warriner (most recent edition), (Harcourt, Brace).
Word Building: Usable but not especially suitable as a remedial text (too academic and technical). I recommend replacement with Levine's Vocabulary for the College-Bound Student (Amsco).

GE 02
College Reader: These texts are usable but have serious weaknesses.
Advanced College Reader: The answer keys are often innaccurate: questions frequently ambiguous or inane: some selections appropriate, some are not pertinent to needs of students. Used judiciously, however, they are of some value. Students especially enjoying Gray's Elegy and two excerpts from Shakespeare's plays.
20 Lessons in Reading and Writing Prose: Not suitable for a remedial class: better applied to an advanced course. I am looking for a replacement.
Supplementary: Pupils read and reported on two short novels, e.g. The Pearl, Animal Farm. In addition, the class studied To Kill a Mockingbird. I also used some of the graded reading exercises in the S.R. A. College Preparatory Unit. The students seemed highly motivated and responsive to this material. All students moved up from 2 to 4 grade levels (based on criteria I developed with the class--Not the usual S.R.A. procedures).

Brief Report on Curriculum and Activities of GE 01 and GE 02, Summer Session 1965

I. STRUCTURE:
GE 01 and GE 02 combined under one instructor. Therefore, courses could be integrated: a distinct advantage.

II. PRINCIPLES:
1. Variety of activities (ranging from fundamentals to college level).
2. Intensity--Students were given very much work, in class and at home.
3. Continuous motivation and encouragement coupled with realistic appraisal of strengths and weaknesses.

III. EMPHASIS:
1. In addition to reading and writing activities (see below) students were given intensive drill in speech (diction, enunciation, audibility, especially pronunciation of middle and final consonants and eradication of such expressions as: "He axed him a question," "aint", "He don't know.")
2. (a) In writing and speaking, focus was on the common sense, clarity and validity of what was to be stated.
   (b) Students learned the importance of being specific, of giving proof and examples of assertions and general statements.
   (c) Students learned to use concrete details to appeal to the senses and back up generalizations.
3. Avoidance of pronouns (especially this, it, these, those, and which) as sources of ambiguity.
4. Grammar, usage, spelling (especially avoidance of run on and incomplete sentences).
5. Drill on language fundamentals: syllabification, accent marks, silent letters, phonetic spelling, multiple meaning of words, differentiation in vocabulary among noun, verb, adjective and adverb forms using the same root.
6. Students wrote many paragraphs and essays on a variety of subjects. Most, after being discussed in class (some written on the blackboard) were required to be rewritten.

7. Students did numerous reading comprehension exercises; discussed comprehension questions; analyzed essays, poems, short stories, novels. Students were extremely responsive to "literature," loved studying excerpts from Shakespeare. In addition to text material students read three novels during semester. In reading graded exercises, students set individual standards for themselves, and strove to move up through successive grade levels.
8. Considerable drill on Latin and Greek roots as vocabulary builders. Also students were encouraged to study 30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary and Word Power Made Easy (i.e. to continue vocabulary study beyond end of semester).
9. Textbooks plus numerous original mimeographed exercises were used.

INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM
STATISTICAL RESULTS OF THE COMPARISON
OF READING IMPROVEMENTS IN REMEDIAL
CLASS COMPARED WITH A CONTROLLED
GROUP WHICH DID NOT RECEIVE
SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS IN READING.

The students in the experimental class improved in reading significantly more than students in the controlled class.

Chi Square analysis based on the number of students in each class who improved as compared with the number of students who did not improve or regressed: 4.26, representing significance at better than the .05 level.

Controlled Group	Experimental Group	Total Improvement	Average Improvement Each Student
20 students		4 yrs. 8 mos.	0.24 mos.
	16 students	21.0 yrs.	1.31 yrs.

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